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ABSTRACT

It is uncertain what a college reading program can do to enhance retention of college students who leave before graduating. Unfortunately, studies of college reading instruction's impact on grade point average (GPA) have not produced clear results. Additional content instruction, however, has been found to have significant impact on GPA's. Still, these programs do not attempt to measure their effect on reading achievement itself, so it is impossible to say what impact they make on students' reading achievement. A study conducted to determine how broad a range of targeted goals can be achieved by a college reading program found that enrollment in a one-semester reading class facilitated success in English class and that this success, in turn, led to a higher level of retention. Another study suggested that treatments are not undertaken with sufficient duration and intensity to reduce attrition. Another study of a successful program did not mention reading gains. It should be reiterated that teaching students to read, to achieve, and to remain in college are three separate tasks. Reading strategies will not guarantee enhanced student retention. Planners should select specific, realistic, and attainable goals for the college reading program; reading strategies commensurate with targeted goals; and appropriate evaluation criteria, while adjusting the program to the type of client being served and their expectations to realistic outcomes. (JL)

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College Reading Strategies for Enhancing Student Retention

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College Reading Strategies for Enhancing Student Retention

When speaking of attrition, attention is focused on the student and on the reasons he/she leaves college before completing a degree. When speaking of retention the focus shifts to the institution and its programs for keeping or retaining the student. In recent times declining student enrollments on college campuses have caused attention to be focused sharply on ways of retaining more students through to completion of degrees as a means of offsetting this enrollment loss. This situation has been confounded in the last eighteen months by what appears to be a withdrawl of financial support to higher education, and, by a badly sagging economy which is plagued with problems of high unemployment. While there continues to be an emphasis on student retention a conflicting trend is emerging by which students are entering college because there is nothing else for them to do. At the same time, the shrinking financial support base for higher education seems to suggest that fewer students will receive college degrees. In the midst of these confounding trends, careful and skeptical consideration should be given to contributions which can be made to student retention efforts by college reading programs.

Effects of Reading Instruction on Academic Success

In a review of the research on college reading programs and student retention efforts Heerman (in press) concluded that 1) teaching students to read in college, 2) teaching students to achieve in college, and, 3) teaching students to remain in college, are three separate tasks.

They are separate yet they share some common ground. It is on this bit of common ground that I will initiate an examination of reading instruction's impact on academic achievement, a factor considered primary by student retention experts.

Each year many students leave college before graduating and they do so while still in good academic standing. It is uncertain what a college reading program can do to prevent attrition and enhance retention for this group. Quite possibly there is no mission here for the college reading program, except perhaps in insuring that students in this group are functioning at a level of reading sophisticated enough to cope with the reading demands of upper level courses. In effect, there may be students in this group who are marginally adequate readers in need of additional development in reading. Beyond this bit of speculation there remains the question of college reading instruction's impact on grade-point-average (GPA) as a measure of academic success.

Recently, at Kansas State University, a study was completed in order to determine if completion of the university developmental reading course contributed to academic achievement as measured by increase in GPA. Twenty-four entering freshmen education majors were enrolled in and completed the university reading course in the fall semester. These students were matched on sex and composite ACT scores. The GPA's of the two groups were compared by a "t" test of related measures (Bruning and Kintz, 1978, 13-16) for the fall semester and for the following spring semester. Table 1 reports the ACT data and the results of the GPA comparisons. The mean composite ACT score for each of the two groups was 14.7 (S.D. = 2.6). This is about 6 points below the mean composite ACT score for the campus. Comparison of

Table 1

"t" Test Results Comparing Reading Students'

and Non-Reading Students' GPA's

For Two Successive Semesters*

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Reading (Fall)	24	2.75	.67		
				1.80	.05
Non-reading (Fall)	24	2.44	.50		
				.32	ns
Reading (Fall--Adjusted**)	24	2.38	.81		
Reading (Spring)	22	2.68	.80		
				2.11	.025
Non-reading (Spring)	22	2.27	.48		

*Student groups equated on:
1. Composite ACT (M 14.7, S.D. = 2.6).
2. Sex
3. Education as the major

**GPA is adjusted by removing the grade for the reading course from each student's GPA.

the mean GPA for the reading instructed group (M = 2.75) to the mean GPA for the non-reading-instructed group (M= 2.44) reveals a difference of .31 grade points in favor of the reading instructed group. This difference, according to a one-tailed test, was significant (p = .05). In a GPA comparison such as this, it is important to adjust the scores for the experimental group by removing the grades for the reading course. In making this adjustment, it was found that the mean GPA for the experimental group was reduced from 2.75 to 2.38. In comparing the latter GPA to the GPA of the non-reading-instructed group (M = 2.44), the one-tailed test revealed no significant differences between the adjusted GPA of the experimental group and the GPA of the control group.

A second comparison of GPA's was undertaken for the spring semester. A loss of one subject from each group caused the number of matched pairs to be reduced from 24 to 22. A comparison of the mean GPA for the reading-instructed group (2.68) to the mean GPA for the non-reading-instructed group (2.27) revealed a difference of .41 grade points in favor of the reading group. The one-tailed test revealed that this difference was significant (p = .025).

In summary, the reading group had a significantly higher mean GPA in fall than did the non-reading group. When the GPA for the reading group was adjusted by removing the grade for the reading course, this advantage was lost. A follow-up comparison of GPA's for the spring semester found a significant advantage in favor of the reading group. From this it would be easy to conclude that instruction in reading has a delayed effect on grade-point-average -- it does not make its impact until the

second semester. Yet, this conclusion is open to question, since a follow-up on the subjects in the two groups for the spring semester found them receiving help from a variety of programs such as:

1. Content tutor assistance
2. Course supplemental instruction
3. Counseling
4. Writing lab instruction
5. Math lab instruction

There was no discernible pattern to the subjects' involvement in these varied programs, therefore, it must be concluded that some unknown combination of treatment variables caused the reading group's GPA to be substantially higher in the second semester. Conceivably, improved reading achievement may have been one of these variables. It must be further concluded that it is not clear the reading course made a single direct impact on the students' academic success as measured by improved GPA.

Unfortunately, the results of this modest study reflect the findings of other studies which seek to document the effects of reading instruction on GPA as a measure of academic success, and, therefore, student retention.

Effects of Additional Content Instruction on Academic Success

There is an area of developmental instruction which does make a clear-cut impact on grade-point average, that is additional content instruction. Two studies illustrate this, the first is reported by Santa and Truscott (1979). These researchers conducted a semester-long reading course by instructing directly in the content of biology, sociology, and writing. Instruction was provided in the specific topics of:

1. taking notes
2. understanding lecturing styles
3. incorporating textbook information into notes
4. test-taking skills (multiple-choice, essay, etc.)
5. Content vocabulary
6. Essay writing
7. Explicit and implicit main idea
8. Practice in taking standardized reading tests
9. Integration of reading into writing
10. Critical thinking through debate, reading, and writing
11. Proofreading in the following sequence:
    a. Reading the paper for spelling errors
    b. Reading the paper for errors in sentence structure
    c. Reading the paper for grammar errors

Experimental and control groups were equated on the basis of SAT scores. Two experimental groups and significantly higher GPA's than did the control group:

GPA for experimental group 1: 2.15

GPA for experiemtnal group 2: 2.17

GPA for the control group: 1.33

In critiquing this study, it is noteworthy that the abstract reported significant gains in reading in addition to substantially higher GPA's for the control group. No data on reading gain is reported in the study itself, however, it is mentioned that subjects received practice in taking standardized reading tests.

A second strategy which makes a demonstrable impact on GPA through additional content instruction is the Supplementary Instructional (SI)

model reported by Martin and Blanc (1981). With this model a paid instructor attends a college class (history was the example given) and otherwise fulfills the role of student. As a "student of the subject," the instructor provides supplementary instruction outside of class to students who are experiencing difficulty in the course (scoring low on tests). The students who want to attend these supplements merely sign up for help and continue to attend the supplementary sessions for as long as they choose. There is no skills testing nor is there a separate program for correcting skills on a massive scale. The supplemental instructor provides instruction in the following within the context of a given course:

1. Notetaking skills
2. Test-taking skills
3. Textbook reading
4. Study skills
5. Bibliographic Skills
6. Reasoning-questioning strategies
7. Tutorial assistance in the content area

The emphasis of the SI model is to immediately enhance student performance in a given course. Martin and Blanc report a significant shift of grades from the range of W, F, and D into the range of B and C for the history course. They report the SI model to be a relatively inexpensive program suited for dealing with attrition which occurs during the first six weeks of the school year. In critiquing the SI model, it is interesting to note that reading achievement is not controlled for as no reading tests are administered. In terms of academic aptitude of the students, Martin and Blanc concede that the SI model may have simply opened some avenues to

some frustrated but motivated learners.

Finally, it is important that we compare the content supplement approach of Santa and Truscott to the content-supplement approach of Martin and Blanc. Figure 1 provides a comparison of these two strategies for supplementing college content instruction. In terms of admission Santa and Truscott have fixed criteria while Martin and Blanc rely on volunteerism. Similarly, Santa and Truscott have specified course limits on days and times for attendance; Martin and Blanc allow students to attend as they see fit. A comparison of program content shows that the Santa and Truscott model provides much more breadth and depth in its content supplement than does the Martin and Blanc model. The above, coupled with the GPA comparisons leads one to the conclusion that the Santa and Truscott model is more suited for more fundamentally deficient learners while the Martin and Blanc model is designed for more capable learners.

Second, the two approaches, demonstrated marked impacts on college grade point averages through additional content instruction. The intent of substantially improving GPA is to facilitate success and subsequently to improve student retention. The obvious question is what impact was made on the students' reading achievement through participating in the content supplements? Unfortunately, there is no answer to this question as in neither strategy was reading achievement measured as the students finished the respective programs.

In defense of the researchers it must be said that neither demonstrated an intent to improve reading achievement. However, because both focused on a retention variable rather than on improving reading achievement,

Figure 1

Comparison of Two Strategies for Supplementing College Content Instruction

SANTA AND TRUSCOTT, 1979	MARTIN AND BLANC, 1981
1. ADMISSION TO THE PROGRAM	
Identified at entrance to college by instructor referral or reading score <35th percentile.	Students volunteer
2. PARTICIPATION IN PROGRAM:	
Course is a 16-week, 3-hour per week program. Attendance appears to be mandatory.	Students volunteer
3. CONTENT OF PROGRAM:	
Geared to integration of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and study skills into 3 content areas.	Relies on a study skills approach to a single subject.
4. DIRECT TUTORIAL CONTENT ASSISTANCE:	
Yes	Yes
5. RESULTS:	
Controls: $\bar{X}$ GPA = 1.33	Controls: *$\bar{X}$ GPA = 2.04 - 2.08
Experimentals: $\bar{X}$ GPA = 2.15 - 2.17	Experimentals: *$\bar{X}$ GPA = 2.40 - 2.44
6. EXIT READING LEVELS OF SUBJECTS:	
Not measured	Not measured

*Computed from grade distribution tables in: Martin, D. C. and Blanc, R. "The Learning Center's Role in Retention: Integrating Student Support Services with Departmental Instruction." Journal of Developmental and Remedial Education, vol. 4, no. 3, Spring, 1981, 4, 21.

questions emerge concerning breadth and depth in college reading programs.

Questions of Breadth and Depth in College Reading Programs

The fundamental question here is: How broad of a range of targeted goals can be achieved by a college reading program? The results of a study conducted by Staley and Smyth (1977) provide some insight. Here, the researchers targeted a broad spectrum of goals:

Hypothesis:	Outcome:
1. No differences will be found between a control and an experimental group on the criteria of reading achievement.	Confirmed
2. No differences will be found between a control and an experimental group on the criteria of overall GPA by the sophomore year.	Confirmed
3. No differences will be found between a control and an experimental on the criteria of English grades--as measured by the number of students receiving grades of "C" or better.	Rejected in favor of the experimental group.
4. No differences will be found between a control and experimental group on the criteria of student attrition by the sophomore year.	Rejected in favor of the the experimental group.

In rejecting two of the hypotheses, the researchers achieved only two of the hoped for goals. The treatment consisted of nothing more than enrollment in a one-semester college reading program with content of an unspecified nature. Even though this was the case, the researchers concluded from their findings that enrollment in the reading class had facilitated success in the English class. Success in the English class had, in turn, resulted in a higher level of retention for the experimental group. Seemingly, the researchers had targeted goals for their program which extended beyond the treatment aspects of their program.

Also, from this study emerges the issue of depth of treatment for achieving program goals. Since retention research shows that attrition remains a critical issue through the fifth semester, the question is stated as follows: Are treatments undertaken with sufficient duration and intensity to make a long term impact? The results of a study conducted by Katz and Wright (1977) suggest that they probably don't. The treatment in this study consisted of enrollment in a semester-long "Communications Course" which emphasized intruction in the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. While the researchers reported mixed results across time on a couple of indices, a clear-cut trend was shown on the criteria of percent of courses successfully completed in a four-semester period:

Percent of Courses Successfully Completed by Group and by Semester

	Semester:	1	2	3	4
Group:	Experimental	77	79	71	69
	Control:	80	76	80	68

The trend shown here is a decline in the number of courses successfully completed for both experimental and control groups by the fourth semester. One of the conclusions reached by the researchers was that students need help of an extended duration -- beyond a one-semester course.

Finally, a study conducted by Haburton (1977) illustrates both problems of breadth and depth of coverage. Haburton used a two-part, semester-long reading course as her treatment. Part one consisted of instruction in textbook reading strategies while part two consisted of practice in the PROBE materials by Charles E. Merrill Publishers. Haburton reported the following results:

Variable:	Experimental Group:	Control Group:	p level
Grade point average	2.48	1.89	.01
Course withdrawls	3.6 hours	5.7 hours	.05
Course completions	7.9 hours	5.6 hours	.05

Subjects in the experimental group had a higher mean GPA, withdrew from fewer course hours on the average, and, successfully completed a greater mean number of hours. Though with this success story in retention there is no mention of reading gains for either group. While it can be argued that college reading programs should be evaluated on more than one index, these reported measures extend no further than the end of the first semester.

Summary and Recommendations

In summary, it should be reiterated that: 1) teaching students to read in college, 2) teaching students to achieve in college, and,

3) teaching students to remain in college, represent three separate tasks.

Does this mean that a reading strategies approach should not be included in a campus retention effort? No, it simply means that a reading strategies approach will not guarantee enhanced student retention. Similarly, it must be said that a campus retention effort will probably not insure enhanced student reading achievement. Based on this, I should like to offer the following recommendations:

1. Set specific, realistic and attainable goals for the college reading program. In general, think narrowly rather than broadly. Ask specific questions:

   a. Can the program effect reading growth?
   b. Can the program effect growth in academic achievement?
   c. Can the program effect improvement in student retention?
   d. Is it realistic to expect the program to enhance student performance in all three of these areas?

2. Select reading strategies which are commensurate with targeted goals. I would suggest the following:

   a. A strategy of reading instruction should produce gains in general reading achievement.
   b. A strategy of content supplemental instruction should yield gains in academic performance (GPA).
   c. A strategy of integrating reading instruction with instruction in other communications skills should yield gains in basic skills achievement.

3. Select evaluation criteria which reflect your goals and instructional strategies.

4. Adjust your program to the type of client being served. In general, I would suggest:

   a. A more structured program for students with greater deficiencies.

   b. A less structured program for students with lesser deficiencies

5. Finally, be prepared to adjust your expectations, for a reading program may do nothing more than get students off to a successful start. It may take a variety of other sequenced strategies across several semesters to retain students in college.

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